

“With insight, perspective, and practicality, Dawn Scott Jones helps husbands tackle the difficult and often unaddressed issue of sexual abuse and walk the road of healing beside the woman they love. Dawn’s pastoral ministry and personal experience have uniquely equipped her to write a difficult book on a difficult topic. She writes with honesty, candor, and wisdom, offering true hope for healing and restoration. A book that should be in every church library, pastor’s office, counseling office, and retreat center, and used as a resource for men’s ministries.”

—Shelly Beach, Christy Award–winning author of seven books, including *The Silent Seduction of Self-Talk*, and contributor to *The NIV Stewardship Study Bible*

“Packed full of important and powerful truth, Dawn Jones’s book is an indispensable guide for the man committed to loving a woman who is a survivor of sexual abuse. For him, this realistic yet ultimately hopeful book will be a lifeline. And for the woman he loves, this is the most profound gift imaginable.”

—Steve Siler, founder and director, Music for the Soul

WHEN A WOMAN YOU LOVE WAS ABUSED

*A Husband's Guide to Helping Her
Overcome Childhood Sexual Molestation*

DAWN SCOTT JONES

When a Woman You Love Was Abused: A Husband's Guide to Helping Her Overcome Childhood Sexual Molestation

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Though the stories of childhood sexual abuse shared here are real, some are composites from women who shared similar experiences. In all instances, beyond immediate family whose permission I have to share their stories, names have been changed to protect the women's privacy.

The author and publisher are not engaged in rendering medical or psychological services, and this book is not intended as a guide to diagnose or treat medical or psychological problems. If the reader requires medical, psychological, or other expert assistance, please seek the services of your own physician or certified counselor.

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To my best friends, my sisters, Denise and Debbie

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by CECIL MURPHEY

If you're a man and you know or suspect that a woman you love was abused, she needs you. She hurts because someone sexually molested her; you hurt because you love her and sense her heartache.

In her past she trusted someone who took advantage of her innocence and her youth. Nothing can undo that. You're not the one who robbed her of joy and peace—and she knows that. Even so, it may be difficult for her to trust you and to allow you to get too close. She may not be able to ask for help; she may seem to resent anything you say.

In response to her pain, she lashes out at you as if you're the culprit. Be patient. And read this book.



Dawn Jones is a survivor, and her journey would have been easier if someone early in her life had understood and been able to listen and comfort her. This isn't to blame anyone, because even if someone had asked Dawn, "What do you want from me?" she probably wouldn't have been able to articulate her need.

Until now.

And as Dawn speaks for herself, she also speaks for thousands of others who have been unable to stand up for themselves. Like countless other victims of assault, she felt alone, unlovable, and abandoned.

I understand—at least as much as someone else can. I understand because I'm a survivor of sexual assault. When I finally faced my abuse, I

was among the fortunate survivors. My wife, whom I refer to as a cradle Christian, had never been exposed to anything of that nature. When I paused the first night after confronting my past, she said, “I don’t understand, but I’m with you.”

And she was. And that’s all I wanted—for her to be with me. I needed to talk, to feel my own pain, and to explore the dark secrets of my heart. I needed to know that someone cared enough to listen, even if I told the same account a dozen times.

It wasn’t easy for Shirley to listen to my litany of sexual and physical abuse. Sometimes she cried; mostly, she held my hand and let me cry.

But she was there.

And you are there for someone you love.

That makes you special—you’re the person who can support a woman who needs strong arms, an available shoulder, and a compassionate heart.

You can make the remarkable difference in her life.

SHE NEEDS YOU

I faced most of my healing alone, without the help or encouragement of my husband. I felt isolated and rejected. I kept my feelings to myself, my fears out of sight.

He didn't know how to help me, and even if he wanted to, I didn't know how to let him in.

Right now you may not be sure what to do or how to help the woman you love. And she's not sure either. You may be afraid you might do something wrong and hurt her more. She may be afraid to let you in. It's a confusing time for both of you, frustrating and overwhelming. At times, she may think she can handle her abuse issues alone, at other times she becomes needy and clingy and wants your support. You, the helper, wish you knew how to read her signals better. "When do I give her space?" "When do I try to reach out and help her?"

It would've been so much easier for me to face my abusive past if my husband and I could have created a partnership—if I could have trusted him with my pain, and if he could have learned how to support me.

Helping a sexual abuse survivor overcome the pain of their past is challenging, and most men become confused about how to help.

Understanding the Goal

I want you to know how important *you* are—how desperately she needs your help and understanding—even when she makes it hard for you to believe it's true, even when she treats you as if you're the enemy

or the one who hurt her. Your role is crucial, and with your support she can gain victories in areas that she can't achieve alone.

Sexual abuse victimized her, but she made it out. She's a survivor, on her way to wholeness. And you'd like to be one, too—a survivor. You've also been victimized. Her painful past wounds you, too. It's rocked your world, hurt your relationship, and disrupted your life. Now it's time for both of you to come through as victorious survivors.

Your love and support will promote her healing as you journey together. But you also want to protect yourself along the way. You can do that by becoming equipped—the first right step in survival. You'll need to learn how to support an abuse survivor if you're going to have a positive role in her healing process. Helping her, however, can be a daunting task. Without a basic understanding of abuse aftermath to serve as your road-map, you'll most likely fall prey to the exhaustion of the journey.

She turns to you for help, but she may also *turn on you* as she's struggling. I understand that kind of behavior. I hurled my share of verbal darts at my former husband Terry in angry rages. I didn't set out to attack him, but I was triggered by things he said or did and fiercely reacted.

You may have experienced that, too.

At times she hurts you. It can feel that the missiles being launched your way are aimed with precision—designed for deflating you and penetrating your soul. That's her unconscious defense system. It's saying, "You're getting too close to the pain, and I have to make you stop." She probably isn't aware that her reaction is defensive and angry or why she's feeling such strong emotions, but either way, you end up getting hurt. In return, you retaliate and become defensive.

The pattern will continue until you both decide to learn about the process of what's happening and how to effectively diffuse it. Without that knowledge, the cycle of hostility will continue and almost always escalate.

Understanding the Contradictions

Because you love her, you want to understand her, and understanding will take you a long way. But you also want to add mega-doses of

other things such as patience, compassion, wisdom, determination, and humor. Some days she'll want to snuggle close and feel your arms around her, and some days she'll strike out at you in anger and cry, "Don't touch me." Understanding abuse will help you develop emotionally thick skin so you can absorb the offense.

It's easy to get lost in the recovery maze and lose hope, so you also need to know your limits. When you're stretched, worn-out, and feel empty, it's time to create a quiet space for yourself. Take a breath and adjust your perspective so you can continue to play a positive role in her healing process.

I use the word *process* because that's exactly what it is—a progression of steps that bring her closer to the goal of wholeness. Her healing won't be quick or easy. For most of us, the process takes years, with small victories along the way. She needs you to help her reach those victories and to celebrate with her each time she conquers another mountain.

You'll also need a realistic awareness of how deeply sexual abuse scars its victims and how involved the journey to wholeness can be. The results of molestation are insidious: they often go unaddressed, and their effects can be cumulative, destructive, and often attributed to other causes. At times her actions may seem unreasonable or strange. She may not cry over a sad event, but lash out over the slightest misunderstanding. She doesn't want to be emotionally disconnected, cold or harsh, but she learned these coping techniques as a child.

You're in her life for love and support, and if you're willing to stay at her side, your encouragement and commitment can help her find the courage to discard old habits that protected her.

Helping a survivor can be—and probably will be—a turbulent process, wrought with confusion and discouragement. Your life will also be filled with contradictions. Just when you feel you've figured out what makes her happy and what's helpful, the rules of engagement change. She laughs at your humor but can turn and snap at you for being insensitive. She's strong and independent, yet can be needy and incapable.

One man said, "I feel like I'm playing in a hockey game, but every

time I skate out on the ice, the rules change and I end up in the penalty box, but first I get a blow to the gut.”

Survivors aren't really making rules; they're just living by what feels right for them in that moment. Living with a survivor of sexual abuse is a blurry world of uncertainties and double standards. What seemed true yesterday may not be true today. What's permissible for her isn't for you.

Martha, an incest survivor, demanded that she be spoken to in a soft and gentle voice. Since her abuse had also included verbal lashings, she empowered herself by exiting any situation where the discussion became loud and threatening. This made sense to Steve, her partner, and he tried to abide by the keep-your-voice-down rule. Yet whenever Martha became upset or irritated, she raged at Steve, screaming and using profanities.

“I'm confused and exhausted,” Steve admitted. “I just can't figure her out.”

Martha was unaware of her inconsistency, but Steve felt like she had implemented a double standard. She wasn't giving Steve the same respect she was demanding.

If this dichotomous life is true with you, it means that some days you'll be her hero, and on other days you'll be her enemy. You think you're on the same side, yet she withdraws and treats you as if you're the one who molested her.

One survivor I met named Sherry shared this story about her stepfather, who molested her:

I can still hear his feet shuffling down the hallway heading for my room. When he got close to my bed, I could see his baggy white socks drooping around his ankles. I squeezed my eyes shut in hopes that he would go away. He never did. And neither has the mental image of his disgusting socks. When Tim [her husband] came toward me the other night wearing baggy white socks, I pushed him away and screamed, “Stop it!” I was enraged. Poor Tim had no idea what happened.

At the time, Sherry didn't realize what had happened, and neither did Tim, but she was triggered by a memory. Instead of welcoming Tim's hug—the response Tim was accustomed to—Sherry was hurled into a flashback that elicited disgust and anger. She rejected Tim by pushing him away, a response of disgust she felt toward her abuser.

In similar ways, you may experience frustrating contradictions with the one you love. Try to be patient. In spite of the conflicting emotions pouring out of her, she needs you. She wants you to hold her hand and walk the path of healing beside her.

The journey is difficult. It's maddening. It's exhausting. And it's arduous. But you'll find reward and fulfillment as you experience the beautiful transformation together.